

Do Volunteers Deserve the Board's Attention?

What do your board members know about your volunteers? Should they know more?

BY SUSAN ELLIS

Imagine your reaction if, as a long-time board member, you discovered a part of your organization you never knew existed, one involving tens or even hundreds of people and services beyond what you thought your budget could cover.

Surprise! You have only to look around your organization to see that you do indeed have this invisible resource—the volunteers who contribute their energy and skills all year long.

The subject of volunteers is usually neglected in the boardroom. But it shouldn't be. Volunteers are of vital concern to a board of directors. Volunteers are your unpaid personnel department. They have enormous potential in public relations, fundraising, and community outreach. They should be part of any resource development strategy. The board should decide how central volunteers are in the organization's service delivery. And volunteers are a source of valuable information for planning and evaluation purposes—but only if someone asks their opinions.

A little board governance goes a long way toward successful volunteer involvement. Here's what you, as a board member, can do to put this invisible resource to work:



Yuppies change priorities.

With permission from Board Builders, carol@boardbuilders.com

If it's hard to answer these questions, consider it a red flag.

Become Informed.

Be sure all board members have answers to the following questions:

- **Where in our organization do volunteers work?** What activities do they perform? Where do they not work, and why not?
- **How many volunteers are active** at any given period in each area of our organization? Are we experiencing difficulties recruiting the volunteers we need? Why?
- **What is the demographic profile** of our volunteer corps—gender, race, age, education, geography? Was this profile actively sought or did it evolve on its own? Is there enough diversity?

- **What trends** are affecting volunteer involvement in our organization?
- **How much staff time** is devoted to volunteer management? Is this sufficient?
- **Who is evaluating** volunteer accomplishments, and what are the findings of this evaluation?
- **Is your organization asking volunteers to donate money as well as time?** Is this a missed opportunity? Conversely, are you missing the chance to mobilize donors as volunteers?

If it's hard to answer these questions, consider it a red flag. Maybe no one knows because not much is being done or no one has been paying attention.

Volunteers Can Change the World



When Babyland Family Services began operating out of an apartment in Newark's inner city, it was the first non-profit infant day care program in New Jersey and one of the first in the nation. Today, over 30 years later, Babyland is one of the most admired nonprofits in the country, with over 200 paid staff and 700 volunteers.

Over the years, it has remained true to its vision statement, "Change the world—start with a child." Now, more than 20 programs extend beyond child care to a comprehensive menu of family services.

A great part of its success must be attributed to its 700 tireless volunteers, including members of the state's foster grandparents' program who serve at almost all of

Babyland's 11 facilities. The centers provide childcare for over 1,000 children, who benefit from early childhood education, a health and nutrition program, and involvement from their parents in their development. Babyland's programs also serve homeless families, pregnant adolescents, teenage parents, families suffering from domestic violence, siblings who need foster care, and children with AIDS.

"It's been an uphill battle all the way, to get the funding and facilities we need, but the struggle is always worth it when you see the end result," says founder and executive director Mary Smith. "I'd gladly do it all again to get where we are today." With her guidance, along with the energy and commitment of its volunteer force, Babyland will continue to change the world, starting with a child.

For more information, contact Babyland Family Services
755 South Orange Avenue, Newark, New Jersey 07106, 973-399-3400.

Under what circumstances can a volunteer be fired?

Commit to a Vision.

Here are questions to help the board articulate a vision for volunteer involvement:

- **How do volunteers connect** to the way we want to be seen in the community?
- **Ideally, what roles** do we want volunteers to fill?
- **What should our volunteers be like?** Should they reflect the people we serve?
- **How might we adapt** our volunteer involvement to emerging trends in volunteerism (such as welfare-to-work plans, corporate employee projects, and mandated community service by students)?

Advise the Staff on Volunteer Policy.

The following are policy questions the board should help the staff answer:

- **Which of the organization's employee policies** apply to both paid and volunteer staff (example: confidentiality)? Which don't apply to volunteers at all (example: sick leave)? And which require adaptation (example: reimbursable training expenses)?
- **What criteria** determine appropriate and inappropriate activities for volunteers?
- **What are our screening requirements** for volunteers, such as police checks or child abuse history?
- **What is our policy regarding discrimination** against volunteer applicants? Do our public affirmative action statements include mention of volunteers?
- **What are the bottom-line performance standards** to which volunteers are held accountable? Under what circumstances can a volunteer be fired?
- **What are the principles for handling a dispute** between an employee and a volunteer? Between a client and a volunteer?
- **Will we reimburse volunteers** for their out-of-pocket expenses? What criteria will we use to decide what other expenses, such as conference registration fees, we will pay on behalf of volunteers?

It is the role of staff to implement such policies. But the board can and should assure that such issues are being addressed.

Give Your Wholehearted Support.

Here are seven things every board member should do to help support volunteer participation.

- 1. Regularly devote time** to volunteer issues at board meetings.
- 2. Analyze data** about volunteer involvement.
- 3. Participate in volunteer recruitment.** Each board member can:
 - Refer volunteer candidates.
 - Distribute volunteer recruitment materials when doing public speaking.
 - Arrange for the volunteer office to have access to your circle of contacts to share recruitment information. Be a visible advocate.
- 4. Take part** in volunteer recognition events.
- 5. Make volunteers as visible** as possible.
- 6. Form a board committee** to offer ongoing advice to the volunteer program staff.
- 7. Think about it.** Too many boards are thoughtless when it comes to volunteers. The best way to maximize volunteer involvement is to become thoughtful on the subject. Know why you want volunteers, provide adequate resources, and successful strategies will follow. ■

Selected References

Ellis, Susan, *Volunteer Management Videotape*.
Muehrcke, Jill, ed., *Volunteer Liability and Risk Management*.
Muehrcke, Jill, ed., *Volunteer Management, Leadership Series*.

These references are available from the Society's Resource Center, 734-451-3582, www.snpo.org.

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